Interview with Kenzie Sitterud

This interview took place on October 13th, 2025, via video conference.

Kenzie Sitterud is a multimedia artist who uses humor and irony to offset the weight of the challenging themes they address. Their work offers a healthy serving of absurdity merged with searing critique and an empathetic touch to illuminate social injustices. Our worlds intersect by way of teaching art at the same tri-university campus though at different institutions, sharing space in the Denver arts community and having lived intimately in and among rock formations during challenging childhoods. Sitterud is also enrolled in the MFA Art Practices program at School of the Visual Arts. Helpful to my thesis, our conversation underscored the potency of humor as a palatable tool for subversion that lowers defenses and fosters connection; the value of clarity and a focused message for revealing and thus improving societal disfunction; and the ways rocks and land hold both trauma and agency. In direct support of my research orientation, they highlighted the fraught relationship a white person can have with land and rock, especially when their roots and sense of self are tied to stolen land.

(a piece from To Dusk (2023) capturing the red rocks in the canyon walls in Utah) cite

Julie Jablonski: I want to talk to you about the prominent place of absurdity and humor in your work, and about your personal relationship to the rocky desert landscape as explored in your exhibitions *From Dusk* and *To Dawn.* Before we get

started, I want to acknowledge from your website that your work taps into the human experience from a non-majority perspective, with the intent of fostering empathy and providing visual insights into social and historical injustices. To kick us off, what are you working on right now? Do you want to share a little bit about where you're at, what you're doing?

Kenzie Sitterud: Katya Grokhovsky is doing this performance piece for the Coker Museum in New York and asked me to do the experimental score for it. This isn't the first time I've used laughter as a soundbite for experimentation in sonic use, but it's the most public one. This experimental composition is very anxiety inducing; a panic attack for 45 minutes. I always have some sort of humor, usually dark and very critiquing.

JJ: I was interviewing Josh Blue, he's a standup comic, and we were talking about horror and humor. For you, what does humor live with? Is it in conversation with trauma, fear, horror, shame, anger? What does humor most revolve around or live with, for you?

KS: I think humor makes things approachable. In my work, I like to talk about heavy shit. Like my *Happy Sad* piece; that was absurdly funny. Absurdity and humor go hand in hand with me. Leaning into a moment that is *very* absurd and very discharged and putting in some iconography that is palatable for people. It extends a handshake instead of pointing fingers. It is accessible, because it's funny.

JJ: Your work feels more urgent than angry. It feels like it's coming from a place of great compassion.

KS: I don't think that approaching people by being an angry lesbian is going to help. Expanding empathy or even understanding is good. Anger doesn't solve problems, and being really intentional within the design, then having a very quiet but to-the-

point focus is going to create more of an “a ha” for people. It very simply illustrates the societal brokenness that we have, right? I think that's my designer sensibility. When I say I'm a Swiss maximalist, it's because Swiss theory is based around legibility and clear composition. So I'm making my work very legible within that context, but with this postmodern fuckery.

JJ: How do you think of art in consideration with design?

KS: If we boil it down, design is taking other people's ideas, regurgitating them and making them legible and consistent so they’re more for the masses. But it's usually based within someone else's idea. I'm a formal designer. That's how I was taught. I just take the idea of society, and make it legible for people through art. I'm using the practicalities, the sensibility and the logic of designing, and distilling them an artistic sense. For a crowd, as opposed to one client. Design is a tool that can change the world. This is the way I use that tool and that knowledge I know.

JJ: Going back to slightly earlier work, you were talking about the Capitol Reef desert in Utah, where you lived, and you said that it's a type of land that speaks to parallels of time, trauma, existence and perspectives. Can you talk about how you feel about land in relation to time, trauma, or perspective?

KS: Well, those rocks have spirits in them, especially in that Capitol Reef area. They're ancestral land, they're indigenous land, but they're also land that the dinosaurs roamed in. So this land not only has human trauma, it has animal trauma, so many centuries of trauma baked into the walls of it. When you're down in the Capital Reef, you feel—this is going to sound so new agey—vibrations, spirits. You can feel indigenous people's spirits. When you talk into those rocks, it ricochets, and you know that's just history, ricocheting back to you, their vibrations, their voices, their expressions and tonalities. We don't have a lot of mixture of genes.

We're like French and English and Norwegian. I'm not supposed to be in that land. So just hearing my voice when I'm talking in those in those canyons, having it come back to me is traumatic as a person, knowing that my ancestors had something to do with them being pushed off their land, you know? Then there's the trauma within the land itself. Even looking at the trees of that land, they're cottonwood trees, and they were intentionally brought in by Mormon pioneers, because they grow fast and the pioneers could make their wagon wheels out of them, and the trees for their house and stuff. So, even the trees hold trauma of colonization. The trauma that is baked within the ground, within the rocks themselves.

JJ: I agree with what you're saying and it’s a strong consideration for me. I can't do work responsibly that deals with land if I don't acknowledge exactly what you're saying. All the rocks that are a reprieve and this place of home for me, I'm not supposed to be on them, and yet I am. So that complicated relationship must be looked at.

On your website, you were talking about your grandfather's cowboy boots. You said his identity was formed by watching American cowboy movies and internalizing the ideas of hard work, individual freedom and masculinity, which he held onto until his very last breath. He lived and died pursuing the American dream. You said that as a child, you soaked up this hyper masculinity while being bombarded with images of the women in your family taking on the quintessential role of the woman in the kitchen modeling this internal misogyny. While you reject this narrative, you are still nostalgic for the Utah desert. Damn it, I don't want to cry. Sorry. I relate to complicated feelings of nostalgia for the land that is also the place of trauma. Can you talk about what all this means to you?

KS: The desert is a place of trauma for me. Hyper religious, oppressive in so many different ways. And that's where I'm from. So even though it's the place that formed me and caused a lot of heartache, I still love it. It's traumatic to not be at the desert, because that's where I feel most centered. That's why I'm nostalgic for it. Because that's my place. That's my home. I hope to retire on the desert, just get crusty and weird.

JJ: What gives you the most hope for the future or how do you think about hope for the future?

KS: it's very hard to be hopeful right now, to be honest. I guess just the knowledge that even in times of turmoil, humans continue to exist. And the fact that babies are still being born is an indication that there is a future. And I really hope for an environmental future. That's where I get the most scared. Because I don't want my son to live in an uninhabitable earth. Always my son gives me hope – humanity has to go on honey. You're too cool for it not to.